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MEMORANDUM FOR DISCUSSION, JUNE 10, 5:30 P.M.

SUBJECT: Alternative public positions for U. S. on Southeast Asia
for the period July 1 - November 15

It is agreed that the U. S. will wish to make its position on Southeast Asia as clear and strong as possible in the next five months. The immediate watershed decision is whether or not the Administration should seek a Congressional resolution giving general authority for action which the President may judge necessary to defend the peace and security of the area. It is agreed that if such a resolution is sought, it should be general in tone. It is also agreed that the best available time for such a move is immediately after the Civil Rights bill clears the Senate floor. Finally, it is agreed that no such resolution should be sought unless careful Congressional soundings indicate rapid passage by a very substantial majority. The question that remains is whether on these assumptions such a resolution is or is not desirable, and the argument which follows is designed to explore the consequences of having and not having such a resolution.

A. Scenario for a Congressional resolution

The first necessity, if we are to have a resolution, is to prepare the case in favor. This requires that the Administration be ready to give answers to a whole series of disagreeable questions. Some of the more significant questions and possible answers follow:

1. Q. Does this resolution imply a blank check for the President to go to war over Southeast Asia?

A. The resolution will indeed permit selective use of force, but hostilities on a larger scale are not envisaged, and in any case any large escalation would require a call-up of Reserves and thus a further appeal to the Congress. More broadly, there is no intent to usurp the powers of the Congress, but rather a need for confirmation of the powers of the President as Commander in Chief in an election year. The basic precedents are the Formosa Resolution, the Middle East Resolution, and, in a sense, the Vandenberg Resolution.

2. Q. What kinds of force, if any, are possible under this authorization?

A. No force will be used if the President can avoid it. If the continued aggression of others should require a limited response,

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2. A. (cont'd)

that response will be carefully aimed at installations and activities which directly support covert aggression against the free people of Laos and South Vietnam. There is no intent or desire to enlarge the action beyond what is absolutely required, and specifically, there is no intent to overthrow existing governments in North Vietnam or in Red China, however much we dislike those regimes.

3. Q. What change in the situation requires such a resolution now?

A.1 This answer should include a candid account of the existing situation and hazard and the growing dangers both in Laos and in South Vietnam,

A.2. This part of the answer should refer to the need for international awareness that the U. S. is not immobilized by a political campaign.

4. Q. Isn't the situation in Southeast Asia one which really requires action (a) by the people on the spot, or (b) by allies, or (c) by the U. S. through other than military means?

A. All of these other kinds of action are needed, and all will be sought to the limit of U. S. ability. Specifically:

(a) The resolution is designed to give encouragement to those on the spot in their own effort at self-help.

(b) We will seek as much help as possible from allies, but in realistic terms we must recognize that our most reliable friends have their own commitments on other fronts.

(c) The political, economic, and social efforts of the U. S. in Southeast Asia, in support of the free governments there, are being intensified to the limit of our wit and resources.

5. Q. Does Southeast Asia matter all that much?

A. Yes -- because of the rights of the people there, because of our own commitment, because of the far-reaching effect of a failure, and because we can win if we stay with it.

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A strong campaign in defense of this resolution will require a substantial increase in the commitment of U. S. prestige and power to success in Southeast Asia. The resolution would need to be preceded by a Presidential message. Such a message should not come as a bolt from the blue; it should itself be preceded by a clear indication of the increasing firmness of the Administration's position, and the reasons for that firmness. Such indications could be given only by public statements of high officials or by such devices as a White Paper.

In sum, a Congressional resolution would require a major public campaign by the Administration. A very important element in such a campaign would be early and outspoken support by leading members of Congress.

This is not a small undertaking, and it would have heavy implications.

The great advantages of an early Congressional resolution are international. It would give additional freedom to the Administration in choosing courses of action; still more important, it would give a signal of this new freedom of action and firmness of purpose in a number of important capitals, the most important of which are in Southeast Asia, on both sides of the line.

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B. Without a Congressional Resolution

If we do not seek a Congressional Resolution, the international disadvantages are obvious, in that we may seem to have a relative lack of freedom of action and will not have built the major new base of commitment and of authority which in the best of cases such a resolution, with its attendant debate, might provide. On the other hand, if we do not have a resolution, we do not have the risks of a contest at home, nor do we pin ourselves to a level of concern and public notice which might be embarrassing if in fact we do not find it wise to take drastic action in the months immediately ahead. Thus we need to consider how much our course of action may be limited if we do not seek a Congressional Resolution.

First, it should be recognized that there are alternative forms of bipartisan support for action: consultation with Eisenhower and the Republican candidate; discussion with bipartisan leadership of Congress; direct Presidential appeal to the people; ample, if not always encouraging, precedent for Presidential action, as in Korea.

Second, there is a wide range of actions which are plainly permissible without a resolution. These include direct military action by South Vietnamese forces, and very substantial deployments of U. S. air, sea and ground forces. Within the framework of SEATO, and in defense of the agreements of 1962, we can plausibly move troops even into Vietnam, Thailand and Laos itself if the appropriate governments request it. Short of direct U. S. military action against North Vietnam, we could almost surely maintain adequate freedom of action even without a Congressional Resolution.

Third, the only time we can get a resolution, in the absence of acute emergency, is within the next three weeks. A strong case can be made that we do not now need to commit ourselves so heavily, and that if the situation changes drastically, we could readily respond by emergency session, certainly in November, and conceivably in September too.

On balance, it appears that we need a Congressional Resolution if and only if we decide that a substantial increase of national attention and international tension is a necessary part of the defense of Southeast Asia in the coming summer.

C O P Y

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